

Diaconal Wisdom from Diaconal Veterans

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*An abbreviated version of this article appeared
in the February 2019 issue of New Horizons*

I have heard that most churches in the OPC think well of their deacons and the work they are doing.

But, what *do* deacons do? What is their ministry and service? What is required of their calling? Many of us may not know.

Most of what deacons do is plain, ordinary, hard work, done in quiet and behind the scenes. It is unique and varied. More often than not it is quite difficult work, requiring energy and time spent away from their families.

Deacons are called to be servants, to be helpful in times of need, to make difficult judgments, to come alongside both saints and unbelievers, to demonstrate the compassion of Christ our King.

I reached out to several OPC deacons with 15 to 40 or more years of experience to get their perspective on their work and calling. I withheld their names so that they could be candid.

My interaction with these men was a great encouragement to me; and the wisdom they shared, based on long years of service, was very instructive.

As one deacon put it, *“Deacons need to maintain an attitude of willingness and service, not begrudging the tediousness of the work, but going forward with the heart of Christ towards others.”*

Diaconal work may not be glamorous, but it is glorious.

How were you called to be a deacon, and how has that calling influenced your work in the church?

C: *“I became a deacon 40 years ago when a small OP church in Pennsylvania elected me to join its elderly pair of deacons in the ministry of mercy.”*

J: *“Our church utilizes a board of trustees, the majority of whom are deacons, as a sort of proving ground for men who wish to become officers. Over time, I was able to come alongside others to help in their time of need. I’ve learned that it is not our role to fix problems, but to assist people by working together with them on the issues at hand. Our work bears the name of*

our King, and we need to keep that in the front of our minds as we provide encouragement and care to others.”

P: “I always felt it was important to help people in need, even before I became a deacon. I was not expecting it when I was nominated but, once in office, my perspective changed and I saw that I was now expected to help, that I now had a responsibility to help others.”

T: “In many ways, before I became a deacon, I was already doing the work of serving others from the example set by my parents, whose influence shaped me profoundly. I have found it very helpful to have my wife serve beside me in ministering to the wife of an elderly couple to whom I am providing care.”

What are your highest priorities as a deacon?

C: “Being a good listener, and prayerfully applying the resources that Christ has given His church to help mitigate the circumstances of those in need and distress.”

J: “To show the compassion of Christ to the body of believers, but it doesn’t stop there. I look at it as concentric circles – our local congregation, the communities around us, regions of our country, and other countries throughout the world.”

P: “Prayer should come first. Then, working with individuals in the congregation. Although, perhaps ‘second’ should be engaging members of the congregation in diaconal service, at least when confidentiality is not an issue, because that can bring a wider range of benefits to those in need.”

T: “There is always the need to serve the urgent. But it is also helpful to do work beforehand and be on the lookout for situations that may arise. Being proactive usually produces better results than sitting back and being reactive. I’ve also learned there is a difference between serving those who have attended worship regularly and those who show up without experience in faith or with the church. Those are two very different starting points.”

What have been your most rewarding experiences as a deacon?

C: “Reading thank you notes from diaconal recipients who give Christ’s church credit for the extension of prayerful concern and help they received while suffering a season of need and distress.”

J: “It is rewarding to help a family through their crisis and then watch them become productive servants in the church. The Lord does the work.”

P: “Members often start to feel better about their place in the church community after they come under the care of the deacons. It’s great to see them interacting with other members, smiling, and contributing because they now feel more like they belong.”

T: *"Spending considerable time with and caring for the elderly saints in our church. In some cases, this has continued until the Lord called them home, and additional help was provided to settle their estates. I have learned to encourage family members to do what they can, too, to care for their relatives. I'm not a 'fixer,' but a believer who comes alongside those in crisis."*

What are your most challenging experiences as a deacon?

C: *"The most challenging part for me has been sorting out true needs from perceived ones, which are often expressed with great urgency, and then applying the appropriate resources that will help and not hurt the situation."*

J: *"The unknowns are the most challenging. There is wide diversity in the people we serve, and distinguishing between helping and enabling in each case is not always clear. We are called to be wise stewards in each variety of family we serve."*

P: *"We often see situations we can't fix. In many cases, we have to make sure we aren't doing things for them, but with them."*

T: *"Trying to discern the truth and how to truly help. As a young deacon, I sometimes felt like we were taken advantage of. Sometimes a family has two views of a problem, and both seem to have legitimacy. I've learned over time that it is okay not to know the right thing to do. Sometimes this is when the Lord works out the problem. Thankfully, I've learned that my relationship with the Lord is not based on my service to Him, but His love for me."*

What advice would you give to young deacons?

C: *"As you listen, pray, and direct resources from Christ's church to those in need and distress, allow time for His Spirit to show you how He directs all things for His glory."*

J: *"Sometimes situations feel dramatic and urgent, but stop, breathe, pray, and seek counsel. Don't feel compelled to have the right answer every time, on the spot. Consult other deacons, you session, your presbytery. When you feel isolated, regrouping with them really helps."*

P: *"In general, we tend to wait for people to approach us for assistance, but in many cases, it is pretty clear when there is a likely need. If you can be proactive, you may be able to prevent a bad situation from getting worse. One of our deacons calls this 'coming alongside,' and I believe that's the right approach. You aren't trying to direct or correct someone, but coming alongside to let them know you are there to help them bear a burden or address a problem to the extent possible."*

Another challenge is when people resist counsel and blame the deacons if their situation doesn't change or improve significantly. While deacons don't take on this ministry in order to get a thank you or accolades, when people get angry at the deacons who are genuinely trying to help,

that can be hard. Of course, our job is to push through that and try to model the love of Christ. Personalities can be one of the biggest challenges. Sometimes it helps to think about the plank that may be in your own eye. It also helps to have a sense of humor about things.

T: "Encouraging the younger men in your congregation to recognize the need to serve, and also better equipping them to serve. I've observed a generational change in service. In the past, it seemed to me that when someone saw the trashcan full, they would simply take it out. Now, when people show up for worship, its 'great news,' but I don't see service to the church coming naturally to them. We need to encourage people to serve with the gifts they have been given."

What resources have been the most encouraging to you as a deacon?

C: "Over the 40 years since my ordination, occasional series of lessons on the diaconate by a pastor or elder have been very encouraging, as well as diaconal literature, conferences within the presbytery, or more recently, national diaconal summits."

J: "Official 'diaconal training' has, in my experience, historically been geared towards the theological basis for that role, I came into the office fairly knowledgeable about the Biblical basis for the diaconate. However, practical instruction was sparse and most advice came by word-of-mouth from other deacons. Case studies, standards, and guidelines are needed for training deacons. Also, shadowing a deacon could grant huge dividends in training. In summary, I find that theological training is solid, but practical training is lacking."

P: "When I first became a deacon, our pastor gave us a book called, "The Deacon's Handbook: A Manual of Stewardship." It contains a mix of Biblical principles and practical recommendations. For example, if a non-member comes in and asks for help paying for a prescription, how about calling the pharmacy to find out if there even is a prescription in process? Or going with them to the pharmacy? Also, checking IDs and writing down key information in a central binder so, if they come back a month later with a new request and deal with a different deacon, that deacon isn't starting from a blank slate. It seems like common sense (we have a binder that has been in use for years), but seeing it in this book made it seem more legit. I also highly recommend attending the Diaconal Summits offered by the OPC. The sessions are very much on point for what deacons do, and it is really encouraging to meet and talk with other deacons and learn from each other's experiences."

T: "I have been blessed with both a mother and father who serve the Lord in many ways and have set a very good example for me. When I was first ordained, my fine pastor was a great resource for this young servant. In addition, the book When Helping Hurts, and the national OPC Diaconal Summits at which authors Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert were speakers, have really helped me better serve those in need."

If you could change one thing about your local diaconate, what would that be?

C: *“To be more proactive in extensions of mercy and less distracted by crisis needs, distress, and the urgency of the moment.”*

J: *“Sabbaticals. Seems like an odd way to answer, but we (in the Lord’s providence) have a group of very seasoned, tenured deacons. All of us (with 15-30 years of service each) are tired and worn and could use a rotational break. The fervor that once existed has waned, and refreshment is desired. This could be addressed by additional (practical) training, but also by new deacons being ordained.”*

P: *“Deacons who do not engage with the congregation, but just attend meetings. I also think maintaining a log of things accomplished by the deacons could be useful.”*

T: *“Encouraging the younger men in the congregation to see the need to serve, and better equipping them to serve.”*

Can you comment on the distinctiveness of the office of deacon?

J: *“The office of deacon is not a stepping stone to becoming an elder. The call to be an elder is a different calling, yet not a higher calling; the two are separate and distinct. My dad was a pastor and he told me, ‘you have a heart to serve.’”*

P: *“The office is unique in the church. It’s a calling to serve others, but that doesn’t mean that deacons are just there to perform chores. Everyone is called to perform chores.”*

T: *“I have never aspired to become an elder. I’ve been asked several times, but have declined. The calling to be a deacon is unique.”*

May we all learn from the wisdom of our deacons, honor them for their heart to serve, respect them for their work, and uphold them in our prayers.